



Deconstructing Lay Definitions of Happiness: Sources, Emotions, Rationale, Essence¹

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ABSTRACT The aims of this study are to investigate definitions and explanations of the concept of happiness, and to introduce a model to classify lay definitions of happiness. This study is part of a longitudinal Croatian study on well-being (the CRO-WELL project). Answers to the open-ended question “What is happiness for you?” from a sample of adult Internet users ($N_{\text{female}} = 1,036$ and $N_{\text{male}} = 839$; $M_{\text{age}} = 38$) were analyzed. The definitions were classified regarding four perspectives based upon which question the respondents were assumed to have actually been answering, summarized as the RISE model: *Rationale for Happiness* – answering the question “How does happiness work?”; *Impressions of Happiness* – answering the question “How does it feel to be happy?”; *Sources of Happiness* – answering the question “What makes you happy?”; and *the Essence of Happiness* – answering the question “What is happiness?”

KEYWORDS happiness, well-being, qualitative, definition, sources of happiness, RISE

Introduction

The question *Do you feel happy in general?* is a routine part of a number of international surveys, but this “simple question” brings along with it many caveats and still captures researchers’ attention (e.g. Veenhoven 2010a, 2010b). While this question may be futile for those who believe that the main characteristic of happiness is its instability, it is rather inapplicable for those who either state that happiness is everything or that happiness does not exist.

In recent decades, many happiness studies have examined lay peoples’ understanding of the concept of happiness. Still researchers discuss that “happiness is a loose term with many meanings” (Diener et al. 2017) and that “despite significant advancements in understanding happiness at both the theoretical and the methodological levels, one crucial topic has been neglected: what do lay people refer to, when they speak about happiness?” (Delle Fave et al. 2011: 187). The qualitative approach in this area focuses mainly on the analysis of peoples’ perceptions of the sources of happiness (e.g. Chiasson, Dube and Blondin 1996; Jaafar et al. 2012; Lee, Park, Uhlmann and Patsula 1999), occasionally also including definitions

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or descriptions of happiness (e.g. Delle Fave et al. 2011, 2016; Lu 2001; Lu and Gilmour 2004). The challenge, thus, is to identify the building blocks and determinants of happiness by considering peoples' spontaneous accounts of what happiness is, while simultaneously overcoming the limitations of previous qualitative studies, such as conducting research on small samples of college students (Lu and Gilmour 2006; Pflug 2009) and limiting the exploration of concepts of happiness solely to individualistic Western societies or East Asian societies (Chiasson, Dube and Blondin 1996; Delle Fave et al. 2016; de Róiste 1996; Lee et al. 1999; Lu and Gilmour 2004; Pflug 2009).

The aim of this research was to explore the lay conceptualization of happiness by collecting free definitions to the open-ended question "What is happiness for you?" In order to provide a potentially useful classification system of general themes that appear in happiness definitions, and to clarify the relationships among various definitions of happiness, we produced an initial categorization into four perspectives (*Rationale, Impressions, Sources, Essence – RISE*). The RISE model of happiness presumes that every definition can be described using one or more of the proposed categories, which we believe will serve as a useful framework and tool to conceptualize the multi-faceted and abstract nature of happiness.

Method

Respondents

The data for this study were collected as a part of the first year of the CRO-WELL project². The sample used was a convenience sample of adult Internet users in Croatia who voluntarily participated in the project. It consisted of 2,315 respondents, of whom 80.1% provided a definition of happiness. The final sample thus consisted of $N = 1,875$ respondents with a mean age of $M = 37.98$ ($SD = 13.345$; age range = 18-85 years); 55.3% were female ($N=1,036$) and 44.7% were male ($N = 839$). Of the respondents who answered questions related to their socio-demographic characteristics, a relative majority had no children (51.5%), were employed (68.7%), completed at least secondary school (94.1%), and had household earnings of between €300 and €500 per person per month (50.4%).

Measure

To gather material for examining lay definitions of happiness, respondents were asked to answer the following question in their own words: "What is happiness for you?" Respondents were instructed to provide their own definition of happiness, which could be either one word, one sentence, or multiple sentences long, and there were no restrictions placed on the format, length, use of expressive markers, or time in which the task had to be completed. Providing

² CRO-WELL "Croatian Longitudinal Study on Well-Being", Croatian Science Foundation Research Project (IP-09-2014).

a definition of happiness was optional, although it was encouraged through a contest awarding prizes for creative definitions.

Procedure

Respondents answered an online survey, answering a comprehensive battery of questions and providing socio-demographic data. Every adult person in Croatia who was interested in joining the survey was able to access the study using the link provided (www.sreca.hr)³. Participation in the study was voluntary and anonymous.

Data analysis

A qualitative content analysis was conducted to condense the text into analytical categories describing the structure of the provided definitions of happiness (see Lu and Gilmour 2004). Definitions were analyzed using a method similar to interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA). IPA explores in detail how participants make sense of their personal and social worlds by studying the meanings participants apply to experiences, events, and states (Smith and Osborn 2008). Although IPA is commonly used to analyze in a comprehensive context (such as interviews), in this research we studied mainly short statements (a maximum of a few sentences and sometimes only one word) when looking for meanings in happiness definitions.

First, three hundred statements were randomly selected out of the total dataset. As suggested by Kleiman (2004), the statements were first read and re-read by two researchers, and units of meaning were identified for each statement. The researchers reviewed their analysis, paying special attention to ambiguous and unclear statements and units of meaning. Discrepancies were discussed until a consensus was reached. Further doubts or disagreements were resolved through consultation with other researchers.

Then the data were approached with the aim of classification of definitions into categories already established in previous research (e.g. people, health, emotions), but allowing new categories to emerge. However, it became obvious that the definitions diverged at the level of which question was answered, as many participants' answers did not relate to the exact question asked. Three hundred new definitions were utilized to test this observation, and this additional analysis supported it.

Therefore, a new coding system was introduced to classify the definitions according to the question participants were assumed to have been answering. Four perspectives emerged: (1) sources of happiness provided answers to the hypothetical question "What makes you happy?"; (2) impressions of happiness provided answers to the hypothetical question "How does it feel to be happy?"; (3) rationale for happiness provided answers to the hypothetical

³ The survey was advertised via various media (TV, leaflets, posters, social networks), but the researchers also approached some organizations/companies (e.g. INA, the Military Academy, universities) that shared invitations via e-mails or intranet to their employees/students (Lučić, Brkljačić and Kaliterna Lipovčan 2018). This approach favoured young and educated participants.

question “How does happiness work?”; (4) essence of happiness provided answers to the hypothetical question “What is happiness?” Two researchers not involved in the earlier stages of analysis used this framework to classify an additional 200 definitions. They reached a consensus rate of over 80%, concluding that all suggested perspectives were represented, and that there was no need to introduce new perspectives into the model.

During coding researchers followed coding rules that were developed simultaneously with new coding system:

(1) *Sources*: Definitions identified concrete causes of happiness – things that make the respondent happy. *Inclusion criteria*: Naming specific causes of happiness (life domains, happy moments, details). *Exclusion criteria*: If sources were not concrete but rather abstract (e.g. successful life, fulfilled dreams) definitions were classified as Essence. If causes assumed how happiness works (e.g. happiness is in little things), definitions were classified as Conditions. *Example definition*: “Happiness is family”.

(2) *Impressions*: Definitions referred to the inner states and feelings that are triggered by happiness. *Inclusion criteria*: Describing inner states of the participant. *Exclusion criteria*: If the description contained emotion that was listed along with sources of happiness, such as health, family, love etc., emotions were interpreted as causes of happiness and therefore classified as Sources. *Example definition*: “Happiness is feeling of peace and contentment”.

(3) *Rationale*: Definitions speculated about the circumstances under which happiness appears. *Inclusion criteria*: Describing a personal view on the nature of happiness, often with advice on how happiness works and how to achieve it. *Example definition*: “Happiness is a matter of choice”.

(4) *Essence*: Definitions contained a broad description of what happiness is and its role/meaning. *Inclusion criteria*: Providing a core meaning of happiness (top down definitions) or very general necessary condition of happiness (bottom up definitions). *Example definition*: “Happiness is the only true feeling” (top-down) or “Fulfilling your dreams” (bottom up).

Dealing with overlap, multiple perspectives, and implicit meanings

Although most descriptions displayed the clear characteristics of a specific perspective, there were some overlaps, and some descriptions fell into two or more perspectives. Once overlap was suggested by at least one of the coders, we asked three experts in well-being research to independently assign the definition to the RISE categories, allowing them to assign each definition to more than one category. When overlapping was reported by at least two experts, the definition was assigned to a specific category indicating overlap. About 15% of definitions were overlapping. In future research, overlapping definitions could be treated as either (1) belonging to both perspectives, (2) belonging to a special category indicating overlap, or (3) removed from the classification system. For example, it was occasionally unclear as to whether respondents were referring to a source of happiness or a feeling of happiness. In such cases, we asked three experts in well-being research to independently estimate the likelihood that the definition (1) described someone’s inner state or (2) described the sources of someone’s happiness. The experts unanimously decided that whenever feeling was listed with other sources it was more probable that the respondent referred to an emotion as a source, and not a description, of an inner state. Indeed, all emotions listed along with sources were those

that could easily be understood as causes of happiness (e.g. a cause of happiness is love for important people, or a cause of happiness is freedom to do what you want).

Furthermore, some respondents provided extensive definitions of happiness including more than one perspective, e.g. describing how happiness works and naming various sources of happiness. These definitions are not seen as a threat to the model – they merely indicate that happiness is multifaceted even within an individual meaning. Those definitions were classified as containing both categories.

About 5% of definitions comprised what we identified as implicit meaning or presumptions (e.g. “a crust of bread is all that is needed for happiness”, “happiness is a balloon that could burst at any time”). To deal with these definitions we employed three experts to write down independently what their interpretation of the definition was. In over 90% of cases they agreed on implicit meaning, so the definition was classified accordingly. Definitions for which the expert panel did not provide a similar explanation were discussed until agreement was reached. Agreement was not possible for only 14 definitions and those were excluded from further analysis.

Results and discussion

1) Sources of happiness – What makes you happy?

In the literature on the qualitative research of well-being, very frequently *sources* of happiness have been analyzed (e.g. Chiasson, Dube and Blondin 1996; Jaafar et al. 2012; Lee et al. 1999). Sources of happiness are usually assessed through the question “What makes you happy?” In our research, it seems that most respondents also answered this hypothetical question. Participants differed regarding the number of sources they mentioned (most of them mentioned one or two, but some mentioned as many as 15), and how general or specific the themes were in the mentioned sources of happiness. General definitions encompass definitions that cite important aspects of life, e.g. “health and love – that is happiness” and “Happiness for me is being healthy, not being alone, and having a job. Health, work, and family – that’s what I strive for”. For most respondents, these domains were health, love and family (or a specific person important to them), although some other domains also appeared (e.g. nature, success, freedom...). More specific definitions elaborated sources of happiness in more detail (e.g. “a hug from a loved one, family, dogs, sun, work, garden, flowers, forest, yoga”), or described specific moments or situations (e.g. “happiness is when you get into the car and ‘Bohemian Rhapsody’ is playing. You have to sing along with Freddie. <3”). In some cases, definitions included both general and specific descriptions (e.g. “... my health and the health of my family, my home, a full fridge, work, income, friends, and hobbies, and being able to enjoy the beauty of the clouds ...”). In rare cases respondents referred to the absence of something as a source of happiness (e.g. life without pain, Croatia without this politics), speaking against the notion that well-being and quality of life may be understood dominantly by focusing on deficits (Cieslik 2015; Hyman 2014).

As sources of happiness, respondents often mentioned *other people* – family members, friends, occasionally strangers, and sometimes even pets. In their connectedness with others,

we found feelings of love, belonging, gratitude, support and respect. Many respondents found their happiness in the happiness of others and in being able to help them. More specific definitions often included appreciation of leisure time. All the definitions within the perspective of *sources of happiness* were descriptive, and although some were quite poetic, they were all specific, naming things, situations, conditions (e.g. health, employment), people, places or events.

2) Impressions of happiness – How does happiness feel?

The second perspective of lay perceptions of happiness is more illustrative, and includes definitions describing inner states, moods, emotions or affect related to happiness. Within this perspective, happiness was most often described as a specific *state of mind* or a general condition of *peace and harmony*: “for me, happiness is satisfaction of the heart and peace of mind”; “inner peace”; “happiness is peace of the soul and the love of those I love”; “a balance of everything – harmony and stability”. Among the inner states, some frequent characteristics for describing happiness were:

- *Fulfilment*: this fulfilment was sometimes only momentary, e.g. “A moment of fulfilment, peace, and acceptance. A connection with fine energies”, and sometimes lasting – “satisfaction and inner fulfilment that is not temporary”.
- *Nonchalance*: “happiness for me is moments of complete childlike nonchalance, without a single negative thought in my mind”.
- *Freedom*: “a feeling of freedom, calmness, and relaxation”; “free flight”.
- *Optimism*: “happiness to me means waking with a good feeling, energy, and excitement about the new day”.
- *Success*: “the good feeling of fulfilled expectations”; or simply “(a positive, cheerful, healthy) state of mind”.

This perspective also contained definitions describing happiness through various *positive emotions* (e.g. “happiness is inner satisfaction and satisfaction with yourself”; “for me, happiness is when my heart is filled with love”; “the warmth of a soul who soothes the melancholy of the day”; “enjoying the moment”; “happiness is opium, ecstasy, the meaning of life”; “joyful acceptance”; or simply “satisfaction” or “love”). Some respondents opted to describe positive feelings of happiness *metaphorically*: “happiness is walking a few centimetres above the ground” or “that little we need to walk on eye-lashes”.

3) Rationale for happiness – How does happiness work?

The third perspective encompasses statements explaining how happiness works and where and how it can be found. Instead of answering the question directly, these respondents provided general instructions on how happiness works, where it is located, and how likely it is for one to be happy.

One of the most common thoughts was that happiness was a *matter of choice* (e.g. “happiness is a matter of decision, a personal choice every person makes, and it is within

us, not without us”; “a blessing that we ourselves are mostly responsible for”) or *awareness* (“happiness is a person’s knowledge about the quantity of good things, events, and people that surround her”; “awareness of the beauty of life”). Many respondents claimed that happiness is *in the little things* (“happiness can be found in the little things that surround us” or “happiness is in the little things and moments that I am often not aware of and don’t appreciate as much as I should”), while others explained that happiness is *humility* (“he who has much is not happy, but rather he who needs little”). Some respondents argued that happiness is inside every person (e.g. “happiness is when you don’t have anything – all you need for happiness is inside you”) or that it is unpredictable (e.g. “happiness comes when you least expect it”), while one other respondent stated the opinion that we should “put lot of effort to be happy”.

Only a few respondents argued that happiness is *difficult to attain* (“happiness always looks like it belongs to someone else” or “we need so little for happiness, and this little is exactly what we are usually missing”) or that it *does not exist at all* (“happiness is when you are satisfied with your time on Earth every day. Real happiness doesn’t exist”, or simply “utopia”).

4) Essence of happiness – What is happiness for you?

This perspective encompasses definitions that offer a comprehensive view of what happiness is, and therefore it was the most descriptive as a response to the question “What is happiness for you?” We distinguish two basic approaches within this perspective: top-down and bottom-up.

Top-down definitions describe a construct of happiness, mostly through its importance to the individual: “happiness is the meaning of life”; “happiness is a priceless treasure for everyone who has it”; “the only true feeling”; “it is better to be born without brains than without happiness.”; “everyone deserves to be happy”; “if you have happiness, then you are a rich person”; “a sure ticket for a better life”; or “a victory against time”. Some respondents in this sub-group claimed it was impossible to describe happiness, calling it indescribable or indefinable.

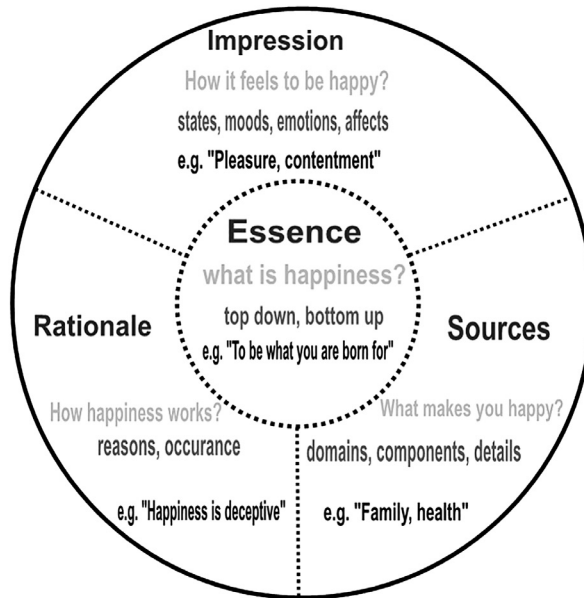
Bottom-up definitions are similar to sources of happiness, but more global: “happiness is a successful life”; “fulfilling your dreams”; “living your passion”; “happiness is being yourself”; “happiness is living the life you wanted to live”. Some respondents claimed that happiness is everything or life *per se* (e.g. “life itself”), while some poetically remarked “happiness – that’s me”.

General discussion – moving towards a model of lay definitions of happiness

The number of categories into which lay definitions of happiness were classified in earlier research has varied from five (Lu 2001) to more than twenty (Galati, Manzano and Sotgiu 2006) depending on the level of generalization in the analyses. However, definitions of happiness diverged so greatly in our study that we were unable to fully associate them with any of these previously established categories. During the coding procedure we realized that participants

were answering the question “what is happiness for you?” from different perspectives. Thus, an additional analysis of definition types was carried out, and definitions were classified according to the question each participant was presumed to have answered in their definition. Based on these perspectives, we suggest the *Rationale-Impression-Sources-Essence (RISE) model of lay definitions of happiness* (Figure 1).

Figure 1: The RISE model of lay definitions of happiness



Among the four identified perspectives lay people dominantly referred to sources of happiness (health, love, relationships, job). Only one (*Essence*) out of the four perspectives explicitly answered the question that was asked; the other three provided lay interpretations of the happiness concept. By revealing that people rely more on happiness sources than on descriptions of the happiness term, our results, similarly to those of Delle Fave et al. (2016), pointed to a potential misalignment between lay and theoretical conceptualizations of happiness. Thus, we believe that our data provide a certain insight into the conceptualization of happiness as a more relational construct, implying that future happiness studies should try to capture both individual emotions and social experiences to provide a fuller account of happiness (see McKenzie 2016).

Content of definitions in the various perspectives

As far as “sources of happiness” are concerned, the findings of this research are quite similar to the findings of research to date on both definitions (Delle Fave et al. 2011, 2016; Lu 2001; Lu and Gilmour 2004; Pflug 2009) and sources of happiness (Chiasson, Dube and

Blondin 1996; de Róiste 1996; Kim et al. 2007; Sotgiu et al. 2011). In this domain most of the participants mentioned health, social contacts, and happy life details. The definitions vary greatly in their levels of generality/specificity: while some participants' definitions were very broad and comprehensive, referring to life in general or broad areas such as family or health, others described a specific moment in detail.

Definitions in the "Impression" category were in accordance with distinct categories in previous research that explored definitions of happiness (Delle Fave et al. 2011, 2016; Lu 2001; Lu and Gilmour 2004; Pflug 2009). For most of our participants, the inner states related to happiness were peace, harmony and serenity, and only occasionally they mentioned thrill or excitement. However, the concepts of *inner peace*, *balance*, *harmony* and *contentment* were not found in prior research on sources of happiness (Chiasson, Dube and Blondin 1996; de Róiste 1996; Kim et al. 2007; Sotgiu et al. 2011). This finding indirectly supports the idea that feelings are manifestations of happiness, as they do not appear in research where participants were asked to list sources of happiness. Simultaneously, the concept of *pleasure and enjoyment* was found in previous research in which respondents were asked to define happiness (Delle Fave et al. 2011, 2016; Lu 2001; Lu and Gilmour 2004; Pflug 2009), as well as in some studies researching sources of happiness (Galati, Manzano and Sotgiu 2006; Lu and Shin 1997). Therefore, the feeling of *pleasure and enjoyment* is, among lay people, probably perceived as both a prerequisite and manifestation of happiness.

Definitions within the "Rationale" perspective explained how happiness functions, under which conditions it can be found, and how fragile and frequent/rare it is. This perspective could be related to the results of Chiasson, Dube and Blondin (1996), who reported the category of "a feeling of responsibility for one's own happiness" in their examination of sources of happiness. Joshanloo (2014) argues that the belief that happiness is fragile is common across individuals and cultures. Some of our participants confirmed this by stating that happiness is "a blink"; "difficult to measure, keep or define" or "like women and wind, happiness is passing".

Finally, our top-down approach in the "Essence" perspective may be related to the category of "ultimate value in life" described in the research by Lu and Gilmour (2004), in which participants were asked to define what happiness is. Joshanloo (2019) studied lay beliefs about the nature, value, antecedents, and outcomes of happiness and found that conceptualizations of happiness could be represented by dimensions of effortful virtuosity vs. doubtful pursuit, and malleability vs. stability. These dimensions largely correspond to the Rationale and Essence perspectives of the RISE model.

Hedonic and eudemonic elements in happiness definitions

In trying to understand happiness, scholars often distinguish between a hedonic approach, which focuses on positive experiences, and the eudemonic, which focuses on meaning, purpose and self-realization (Ryan and Deci 2001). However, for many definitions in our dataset it was not possible to distinguish between hedonic/eudemonic perspectives because context was missing. Many participants stated sources like health or family, which could be interpreted both ways and/or contain combinations of both hedonic/eudemonic elements,

depending on how the situation is experienced. Only a small number of definitions strictly addressed only one of the perspectives. Therefore, instead of classifying definitions, we opted to search for elements that could suggest a dominantly hedonic or eudemonic viewpoint. Still, many of the definitions described pleasures and therefore contained a certain hedonic element. However, only a few of them referred to excessive enjoyments or material goods, while the vast majority portrayed simple daily delights (e.g. “to wake up beside the person you love”; “coffee, blanket, and a good book”; “to have a spoon and a full jar of Nutella for yourself”; “a game of Warcraft with friends”). It seems that our participants find happiness in ordinary daily moments (e.g. finding enjoyment in what they have and not desiring any extravagancy), which is a relatively common notion in the general scientific discourse as well as in the lay theories of happiness. Rarely did participants include a eudemonic element in their definitions (e.g. “to have purpose in life”), and hardly any mentioned flow or activity that was supposed to produce a state of flow. So, our data provide material for debating if happiness is indeed only a “positive emotional display” rather than philosophically complex and ethical evaluative behaviour that emerges from the effort to balance the good and bad in one’s life (Bartram 2012).

Participants often referred to significant others and helping them. This could be interpreted as pursuing a meaningful life and contributing to something bigger than themselves (Peterson, Park and Seligman 2005), and to the immanently social nature of happiness and its creation through persons’ social relationships and the emotional experiences of others (Cieslik 2017; McKenzie 2016). For instance, happiness was defined as “my mother – when I manage to make her smile – it is like hugging the Universe filled with happiness”; “when you make a good deed and warm feeling of happiness overwhelms you”; and “to make others happy”.

Our participants also quite often provided descriptions of simple daily moments that make them happy. Contemporary theories of well-being stress the importance of recognizing and accumulating positive experiences in daily life. For example, according to Csikszentmihalyi (2002: 9), “the joy we get from living, ultimately depends directly on how the mind filters and interprets everyday experiences”. Furthermore, pleasant daily events elicit positive emotions and, according to Broaden and built theory (Fredrickson 2004), help in building important physical, social and psychological resources and contribute to the individual’s well-being. The lay definitions of happiness gathered in this research show that people indeed cherish simple everyday moments and recognize them as important sources of happiness.

Cultural perspective

While many studies consider that individual personal characteristics or conditions are determinants of happiness, the sociology of emotions builds on the insight that what people feel is shaped by others’ expectations, relations of power, social capital, civic engagement, culture etc. (see Hyman 2014). Happiness is an aspect of peoples’ lives that can be understood not only as a private, internal experience, but as something that is created, interpreted and articulated via culturally specific ways of thinking and acting (Hyman 2014). Culture

is one of the important contextual factors of happiness, and differences in culture have consequences for the meanings people ascribe to happiness as well as for its' determinants (Lu et al. 2001; Uchida et al. 2004; Uchida and Kitayama 2009). Also, the social and economic situation in a country involves both internal and environmental processes that could be reflected in the variable amount and discourse in happiness definitions depending upon a wide range of factors (e.g. values, norms). Thus, it could be proposed that the current social and economic situation in Croatia may as well be reflected in the happiness definitions of its citizens. Croatia is facing many challenges in the labour market and social life generally: a high national unemployment rate, low GDP, high level emigration of the prime-age population, a high proportion of citizens at risk of poverty or social exclusion, high perceived corruption, and an inefficient justice system (Tomić, Rubil, Nestić and Stubbs 2019). Taking these circumstances into account, definitions of happiness containing sources that are purely materialistic, such as "to have a decent job" or "to have a full fridge" become more understandable. These types of happiness definitions nicely illustrate how material conditions can affect people's point of view, for example by reducing their ability to value more everyday experiences (Quoidbach, Dunn, Petrides and Mikolajczak 2010). Also, they speak in favour of an interactionist perspective which recognizes that external life circumstances (e.g. unemployment) represent very dynamic processes which influence our well-being and happiness via identities, roles, activities, relationships and experiences (Ahuvia et. al. 2015). Since Croatia is a predominantly Catholic country it was expected that Catholic values would be integrated into the happiness concepts of its citizens. Previous research indicated that happiness associated with religiosity is, in part, a function of the match between the individual and the aggregate societal religiosity of the culture/nation in which he lives (Fulmer et al. 2010). However, in our research, explicit mentioning of religious topics (such as God or faith) was rather rare⁴ (less than 20 definitions all together), but universally positive (Christian) themes such as family connectedness, serenity and humbleness, and almost complete absence of definitions that would contradict Christian doctrine (e.g. wealth, decadency) were quite present.

Our results, as in many prior studies (e.g. Delle Fave et al. 2016; Lu and Gilmour 2004; Jaafar et al. 2012; Galati, Manzano and Sotgiu 2006), indicated a rather universal cross-cultural pattern of happiness categories/domains such as relationships, family, positive feelings and health, achievement and love, implying that future studies of happiness should take a stance of simultaneous cultural universality and specificity of happiness (Diener, Oishi and Lucas 2003; Veenhoven 2014).

Conclusion: study contributions, limitations and future research

The advantages of this study were mainly related to our sample size, which was quite large. Secondly, this research investigated happiness among respondents of varying ages, levels of education, economic status etc. Another possible advantage was that respondents were

⁴ probably due to the sample characteristics

allowed time to contemplate happiness if they so desired, as it was an untimed online survey. Also, definitions of happiness were researched rather than sources of happiness, which have been the subject of inquiry more frequently (Chiasson, Dube and Blondin 1996; de Róiste 1996; Kim et al. 2007; Sotgiu et al. 2011). Additionally, this study contributes to the body of knowledge on the concept of happiness in Eastern Europe, which has not been subject to a great deal of attention in research as of yet.

Our approach represents a shift from previous research on happiness definitions, which has tended to focus on the content of definitions rather than the perspectives of respondents. For example, arguing that “happiness is family” is obviously wrong, as we all know that family is a group of related persons and happiness is an emotion or inner state of mind. People who argue that “happiness is family” mean that family makes them happy – that their family is a source of their happiness. On the other hand, those who say that happiness is thrilling describe how they feel when they are happy. These are two very different perspectives, and we think it is not justified to categorize definitions of happiness before the respondent’s perspective is determined (i.e. what hypothetical question he is answering).

We propose the RISE model to describe the thoughts underlying the answers induced by the question “What is happiness?” The RISE model demonstrates the different perspectives people may have when asked what happiness is. We believe that the model can be used to classify definitions into perspectives, before conducting further analyses inside each category. So, after the initial RISE classification is done, researchers can then ask questions such as “what makes people happy?” and search for answers in *the Sources*, or “how do people feel when they are happy?” and inspect *the Impressions*. Implementing this model would simplify the coding procedure and, more importantly, enable comparison of findings from different studies and in different cultures. For example, findings of research on peoples’ perceptions of the sources of happiness (e.g. Chiasson, Dube and Blondin 1996; Jaafar et al. 2012; Lee, Park, Uhlmann and Patsula 1999) cannot directly be compared to those analyzing definitions or descriptions of happiness (e.g. Delle Fave et al. 2011, 2016; Lu 2001; Lu and Gilmour 2004). However, once the RISE model is implemented and definitions are categorized, *Sources* of happiness derived from happiness definitions correspond to those obtained by surveying sources of happiness.

The most serious disadvantage of this research relates to the reinforcement element included in the instructions: respondents were asked to write what happiness is for them, but they were told that the most creative definition⁵ would win a prize. Although most of the respondents provided simple, rather cliché definitions, it is possible that some of the respondents, especially those contemplating in a poetic or philosophical manner, were biased by this instruction. Therefore, we believe that this instruction influenced the mode of expression and articulation of some respondents (e.g. elucidating more elaborate or detailed descriptions), but rarely the content itself. The second issue relates to the self-selected convenient sample generated by an open call to anyone willing to participate in an online survey. This approach resulted in discrepancies favouring young, female, and educated

⁵ It was not possible to randomly select the winner due to specific laws in Croatia, so the inclusion of this instruction was a compromise.

respondents. However, since the total number of respondents was very large, we managed to remediate this issue by increasing the number of deficient categories in the sample, thus bringing it closer to population parameters. Despite this, the number of seniors was still quite low. Finally, due to the qualitative nature of the study and the large sample, the coding procedure was very challenging. The use of an open-ended question resulted in various types of descriptions, and an open coding procedure was applied since the original theoretical codes were not very useful. To analyze longer definitions, we used a procedure like IPA, but since many items were rather short (often just one word) in such cases we needed to convert to simply identifying the basic meaning of the word. In such cases we had no context to refer to, so we relied on the dictionary meaning. We are aware that people may hold different subjective connotations of the same word, but we had no other option but to assign the same, basic meaning to all single-word definitions. Also, we are aware of potential problems of accuracy in the process of self-understanding and self-awareness of emotion (McKenzie 2016). Thus, our phenomenological interpretative framework was not completely successful, and the study results contribute primarily to the categorization of lay definitions of happiness and not their content *per se*. The classification of happiness definitions under one/any of the categories and its subsequent interpretation is complex and may fail to capture the richness of the participant's perspective. This problem is even more evident when interpreting completely de-contextualized data (e.g. one-word answers) and if the researcher is faced with empty signifiers (e.g. family) without being able to explore the signifiers' meanings from the participants' perspective. Thus, our goals regarding overcoming the limitations of previous qualitative studies were not completely fulfilled. In future research, when faced with a dataset containing short phrases/answers, synonym frequency analysis should ideally be supplemented by debriefing interviews with participants. This would create opportunities for discussion of the meanings of terms from the participants' point of view and add not only to further categorization of happiness definitions but also to the possible categorization of the terms' content.

Our research does not allow us to test if portraying happiness with small things/simple delights (e.g. a cup of coffee, a smile) or basic needs (family, health) is confirmation of the widespread notion that "happiness is in small things" (e.g. Csikszentmihalyi 2002) or if it is a reflection of the uneasy Croatian socio-economic situation through lowered life expectations and reformulated conditions of happiness. But since cultural contexts and scripts influence our emotional experiences and self-evaluations, including happiness, further research should explore how interpersonal relationships, money, health, religion, social values, employment etc. are reflected in peoples' understanding of happiness (Hyman 2014).

Despite these limitations, the RISE model shows that people define happiness not in terms of its sources, but also offer global interpretations of the term, describing its overall nature (essence), emotional context (impression) or its achievability and fragility (rationale). This may influence peoples' responses to happiness scales. We believe it might be useful for future research to employ scales to assess participants' conceptions of happiness, such as achievability, fragility or value (e.g. Krasko, Schweitzer and Luhmann 2020; Joshanloo et al. 2015) along with standard measures.

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